

# **Cancer and Infertility**

## **Introduction**

Cancer and Infertility. Those are two words most women never want to hear – let alone face at the same time. If you're reading this, chances are you facing that exact situation.

When I was diagnosed with cancer, I felt completely terrified and overwhelmed by the maze of information and mind boggling choices. While my friends and family were incredibly supportive, they could not fully understand what I was facing.

I've written this to share my experience navigating cancer and infertility in the hopes that it may help you. You're not alone. Many women have gone through the same ordeal and not only survived – but went on to thrive.

## **My Experience**

Hearing the words, "You have cancer" irrevocably changed my life. My relationship with cancer began 15 years ago. I've had three surgeries – and each one had a unique impact on my life and my fertility.

### **1994**

When I was diagnosed with cancer at 19, my life was turned upside down. In the span of one week, my life went from college classes, papers, and midterms, to a world of oncologists, diagnostic tests, and an impending surgery.

The tumor was the size of a small basketball and the doctors' assessments were that it was gynecological in origin. However, they were unable to determine the exact organ due to its large size.

The outlook was grim, as the doctors also believed the cancer had probably spread throughout my abdomen. I was told I would be fighting for my life and IF I survived I would never be able to ever have children.

In a moment, my neatly planned life had gone horribly wrong, and I didn't understand why. I was stunned and very angry. I felt helpless and unable to control my own body. While my friends were talking about the next party, I was facing losing my life at the worst case and my hair and my ability to be a mother as the best case.

Against all odds, my surgery was a success. The tumor was ovarian and contained. The surrounding tissue and lymph nodes were completely cancer free. As a result, I did not need chemotherapy or radiation.

While I lost one ovary to cancer, the other one was healthy and my fertility intact. I was delighted and couldn't wait to go back to being a "normal" college kid.

## **2004**

I spent the next ten years healthy and happy. Then, I started having abdominal pain. It started feeling like cramps and over the course of a few weeks became so bad that I was unable to get out of bed or stand upright.

After a battery of tests, my doctors found another mass on my left ovary and scheduled immediate surgery. Due to the intensity of the pain, I didn't even consider fertility preservation prior to the surgery. I just wanted the pain to stop.

Again, I was sent into surgery. The wonderful news was that pathology showed the mass was benign and my oncologist was able to remove the mass and leave the rest of the ovary in tact.

The not-so-great news was that adhesions had caused my intestines to wrap around my uterus and remaining ovary and attach the entire mess to my abdominal wall. That was the source of the pain. It took several hours of surgery to untangle the mess.

While I had never heard of adhesions before that day, I would take them any day over cancer!

## **2006**

Due to my original diagnosis, I have had sonograms and CA125 blood tests done every three months since 1994. In a check up, my oncologist found another growing mass on my left ovary. I had a subsequent CT scan, MRI and an additional CA125 blood test. All of the results pointed to a recurrence of cancer.

I was shocked and completely devastated. I had no pain, no symptoms. In fact, I had never felt better in my life.

Removal of my remaining ovary appeared imminent and a complete hysterectomy was a distinct possibility. As a result, my oncologist referred me to the UCSF Center for Reproductive Health. I could barely get my head around facing cancer again – let alone facing infertility and menopause at 30.

My husband and I literally went from an appointment with my oncologist to discuss surgery options to a fertility preservation consultation with Dr. Rosen at UCSF.

I was so overwhelmed that I could barely fill out a patient intake form. Dr. Rosen was incredibly friendly and understanding. We knew very little about fertility options – other than they were expensive and not covered by my insurance. He walked us through our choices – from freezing eggs to freezing embryos and the risks involved. He patiently answered all of our questions.

His nurse went through more details and promised to have the billing department send us information on the costs of the procedures. We took all of the information and promised to follow up with Dr. Rosen after my husband and I had time to discuss it.

Deciding what to do was one of the most difficult decisions of my life. Did I risk waiting a month for surgery, in order to go through fertility preservation? Could we even afford it?

Would the hormones cause the mass to grow faster? What if the cancer spread during that time? What if the cancer had already spread throughout my abdomen? Would I even live long enough to have kids? What if I had a child and the cancer returned again?

The choice was gut wrenching. Ultimately, we decided to go through an egg retrieval and embryo cryopreservation. The process took roughly four weeks. Despite the reassurances from the doctors, it was still completely nerve-wracking.

My egg retrieval was scheduled for a Friday and my surgery for the following Monday. My little left ovary produced 33 eggs, 19 of which became our embryos. Dr. Rosen was fantastic and called us with the fertilization results and stayed in constant contact with my oncologist to ensure I had the best care possible.

A few days later, I went in for my third surgery. Despite the ominous test results, the mass was benign. My oncologist was able to remove the mass and leave a piece of my ovary, which prevented early menopause.

The road to recovery was much harder and longer with this surgery. I spent a little over two weeks in the hospital, due to complications of severe anemia and an infection. I expected to be back at work in six weeks like my previous surgeries. This time, however, it took nearly four months before I was able to return to work.

In spite of the long recovery, I had avoided cancer again and had taken steps to preserve my fertility. While it was a very difficult choice, I made the right choice for me.

### **What I Learned**

In 2009, my husband and I decided to start a family. We have been through three rounds of IVF. I thought cancer was the tough part and completely underestimated the emotional and physical drain of IVF.

Throughout the process, I learned there are quite a few parallels between cancer and infertility.

- My most regular relationship over the last 15 years has been with the sonogram probe
- I never got used to a whole room of people staring at my, ahem, “lady business”
- I became an encyclopedia of all things gynecological
- Needles – loads, loads and LOADS of needles
- I held my breath for every blood test result
- I will never take my health or the wonder of life for granted
- Laughter really does help healing
- Seeing a tiny fetus on the fuzzy sonogram screen made me forget all the pain and difficulty it took to get there

## **Today**

My third round of IVF was successful and I'm currently 9 weeks pregnant with my first child. Despite some early complications, my husband and I remain ever hopeful for the delivery of a healthy baby in May 2010.

The last 15 years have been an incredibly long road, fraught with pain, laughter and healing. In spite of everything, I'm incredibly blessed and grateful to be alive, healthy and able to share my experience with you.

Your experience will undoubtedly leave scars – physical, mental and/or emotional. It took me years to come to peace with the jagged nine inch scar on my abdomen. What I finally realized is that my scars, visible and invisible, represent who I am. Those scars saved my life. Moreover, the scars are reminders of the strength, courage and fortitude I never even knew I possessed.

No matter what choices you make - your life will be irrevocably changed. This experience will become the fabric of who you are and show the world around you the courage it takes to become a survivor.

**- Gina Danford**